

Tips on Making a Better World

Three kinds of minor characters. In addition to your main character, most stories have three types of minor characters: (1) Characters who help the main character in some way (I call them “helpers”); (2) Characters who hinder the main character in some way (I call them “hinderers”); and (3) Incidental characters who neither help nor hinder the main character but need to be included so the story makes sense (I call them “incidentals”). If you’re up for a challenge, think about creating a character who shifts during the story. Maybe they start out as someone who hinders the main character but end up helping him in the end. Maybe someone who seems like an incidental character at first, ends up being the real bad guy. (If you’ve ever seen Scooby-Doo, you know what I’m talking about.) There are lots of possibilities here and, if you can pull it off, readers love to be surprised by characters this way.

Places have meaning. Most stories have scenes in several different places. You should always make sure you describe each of these places in some way for your readers. Don’t assume that they will know exactly what you mean if you just say “the school” or “Patricia’s house.” What readers often do when they hear things like this is make a picture in their mind of something from their own life. But that’s like letting someone else write part of your story. (It saves you some work but you can’t take the credit and, more importantly, your ersatz collaborator rarely puts in a good effort.) The thing to be aware of is this: places are meaningful to people. If you say that a character is walking by a river, to you that may mean they’re headed for a relaxing and contemplative afternoon jaunt. But a reader thinking about a white water raft trip or a picture of Niagra Falls will develop a completely different (and incorrect) set of associations. Places have meaning to people. Describe them thoroughly so the meaning they get is the meaning you intend.

Things have meaning, too. Things in your story (important objects, entities, and activities) can mean things to your readers, too. Sometimes, especially in horror stories, authors use things as “symbols” so that they come to represent ideas for the reader. For example, a writer might use a description of a frail, withered tree to stand for the idea of getting old and reaching the end of one’s life. If a writer just does this once or twice, it’s called “symbolism.” If the whole story is a kind of symbol, it’s called “allegory.” For fun examples of this, read the stories of Edgar Allan Poe.

What’s in a name? A quick and easy way to convey meaning to your readers about things and places is to pick the right name. For example, if I’m writing about a business executive who controls a large company through the computer on his desk, I might want to give it a brand name like “PowerCenter 6000.” Or, if I want to suggest that the employee lounge his company provides is dark, dirty, and located inconveniently at the bottom of the building three floors underground, I might have people in the story refer to it as “the dungeon.” This tends to work best only when writers are very subtle about it. (And, just so you know, neither of the examples I gave here were very subtle.)

Example

Fiction is all about a world that you create. The world I'm trying to create for my story looks to Jeremy, my main character, as though it isn't a very friendly or interesting place. Then, later in the story, as he begins to change, his perceptions of the world change, too, and it becomes more pleasant, welcoming, and fun. The world was this way all the time, of course. Jeremy just didn't see it that way. For most of the story, however, we see the world through his eyes.

JEREMY'S WORLD

PEOPLE: Jeremy's mom and dad; his Uncle Edward; other kids at school; teachers; other kids and their families at the big chess tournament; Jeremy's dog, Bishop. All of these characters are "helper" characters. There are no characters in the story who work against Jeremy. But he thinks they're all against him in some way. Even the kids who beat him at the chess tournament are helping him, in a kind of opposite way, to figure out what he really wants and how to be happy.

PLACES: Jeremy's basement room; upstairs at his house; at the dinner table in the kitchen; at the park where Jeremy goes with his dog; at Jeremy's school; in the van when they drive to the city; at the hotel where they are having the chess tournament; in the tournament hall.

THINGS: Chess, chess books and chess magazines, the Internet, e-mail, Jeremy's computer, his TV set and stereo, the homework Jeremy never wants to do.

IDEAS: Competition, loneliness, ambition, frustration, trust, stress, hope for the future.

THIS IS A WORLD WHERE... You don't always get what you want, but sometimes you get what you need.